10: Marshall M-S (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
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THE KARENS OF BURMA

I

BACKGROUND

101 175 THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

181 131 361 ● 563 186 They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

173 Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

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173 traces of their ancestry. Probably they originated in China
171 and came into Burma from the north-east in about the sixth or seventh century of the Christian era. Their language and personal characteristics would seem to indicate this.

101 The derivation of the term "Karen" is uncertain. It is the name by which this people have been called by the Burmese. The name by which they call themselves is *Pga K' Nyaw* which may be of Chinese origin and means "Men". They are the only real men. All other peoples are designated by their name as "Burman", "English", and so on.

II

DISTRIBUTION

101 The only part of Burma that can be called Karen
131 country is that lying eastward from Toungoo. Here in
● 363 the mountains the villages have never been dominated by their more powerful Burman neighbours and in several sections they retain their Karen names. In other sections they are known by Burmese names and show the influence of their having been overpowered at some time.

101 On the eastern slopes of the ranges which are dominat-
631 ed by Mt. Nattaung (called by the Karens *Thaw Thi*) are the three small independent states the chiefs of which are Karens. They belong to the Red Karen tribes and are called in Burmese Karen-ni. These states are Bawlekeh, Kyetpogyi and Kantarrawaddi and do not comprise a part of Burma politically except that they owe their security to the British Government with whom they have treaty relations established by the early Deputy Commissioners of Toungoo.

There are a few Karens in the ranges of hills as far

In the early 1900's many Karens who had cleared immense tracts of land raised large crops of paddy and became well-to-do. It was then that they employed many Burman and Indian coolies to work for them. They built substantial houses, often of teak, or in a few instances of brick. Some of them were able to add field to field and became really wealthy. It was at this time that money-lenders became very active and going about the villages imposed loans of easy money on the unsuspecting cultivators. These loans were then allowed to lie idle for a year or two until the interest, set at exorbitant rates, mounted to nearly double the original loans, when a sudden demand for full payment could not be met ; and the results were that the lending sharks foreclosed on the rich paddy-fields. In this way many a Karen who was once a prosperous cultivator became a tenant on land that he had previously owned. This process continued until near the time of the invasion and the property, land, houses and cattle of the Karens as well as of Burman cultivators, were largely in the hands of absentee landlords. The Indian Tamil Chettiars were the most numerous class of money-lenders and most exacting in demanding their pounds of flesh.

In only a few cases have the Karens proved to be good traders. They are too soft-hearted and often sell on credit which they feel embarrassed to collect, and therefore they soon fail. The shops in the Karen villages in the hills are most often kept by the Shans who are born traders. On the plains the Chinese have found the Karen villages good places to make money. They begin in a small way and soon, by lending money, collecting their debts by foreclosing on the land, and sometimes by selling

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437 444 563 426 opium on the quiet, grow rich at the expense of their neighbours. They usually come to Burma single but they can easily marry, for their prosperity attracts the young women, and then they settle down to raise a family of mixed blood, and make a real contribution to the life of the country.

463 313 231 The Karens are at home in the forests. In many cases they became expert foresters for the Government and for the timber firms. Where the use of elephants was needed they were largely employed. There were at the time of the invasion a number of Karen timber contractors owning elephants which they understood and knew how to catch and train and use in hauling logs from the jungles to the river banks where in the rains the swelling streams carried them down to the markets at Moulmein and Rangoon.

The Karens have established a safe way of training newly-caught elephants for timber use. Instead of the more cruel methods of jabbing and brow-beating often used by Indian elephant drivers, they tie the animals up to the large trees left near the point of the V-shaped corral that they build along the elephant runs in the jungle, and then they keep the animals from sleeping by continually feeding and working with them for five or more days, until they subdue their wild spirit and win them to obedience to their keepers. Thus in six months they can train a full-grown animal to follow the directions of its keeper and drag out logs.

177 747 212 From the first contacts with the "Younger White Brother" their desire to read the Book which he brought them was very keen. In the beginning men and some women of all ages went to school to be able to read the

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The generations through which they have been exploited by their more powerful neighbours have left a stamp upon them and even educated men and women often allow themselves to be outdone in office and shop simply because they dislike to evoke contention. Often the faithful work of an individual does not bring the proper credit to the one earning it, for another steps in and takes advantage of his reticence to claim honour which he does not deserve.

In the old days retaliation for the exploitation they underwent at the hands of the Burmans would be taken by their striking back whenever they saw an opportunity. Small parties of Burmans who were caught in the Karen hills seldom returned alive. It was not because the Karens were worse than others or more given to atrocities, but simply that to them it was a way of getting what they thought was justice.

In their original condition they not only made forays against other races but were continually at feuds among themselves. The theft of a buffalo or a bronze drum, or the kidnapping of a child or a slave, was occasion for a foray. These usually went on and continued from bad to worse until villages were destroyed and many lives were lost. There were no other courts of justice.

The Karens felt the lack of the Book, as they called the Bible,—a need that contributed to what we now would call an inferiority complex. But like all people, either individuals or nations, that have an inferiority complex they were ready and waiting to be led out into greater freedom. They hailed the coming of the American Baptist missionaries as those who could help them to find themselves, to get their rights and to free themselves from the thraldoms into which they were conscious that they had

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621 the chief, often his own relatives, would remain in the village. This refers to those sections where the Karens were left to themselves.

621 177 Under the settled conditions brought about by the British Government things remained about the same. The headman was recognized as the seat of authority by the Government, but still the Karens themselves retained their own independent spirit and followed him only by consent. However, since it has required the permission of the Government to set up a new village site there has been less splitting of villages. In some cases there has been a revival of the old Burmese office of *Taikh-thugyi* or Collector of Revenue for a section comprising several villages. In such cases the local headman has been relieved of the collection of the taxes in the area.

563 653 186 The exploitation of the Karens by the Burmans in the days of Burmese rule was chiefly by the forcing of unrequited labour in building walls, digging canals, etc., and the general rough treatment they received when they ventured into the towns. They were shown to be unwelcome by having the dogs set upon them. Such treatment resulted in a great deal of racial antagonism on the part of the Karens towards their more powerful neighbours. This prevented closer relations between the villages which were located in the same section. It made the Karens more exclusive, keeping them within their own tribe, and causing them to refuse to mix with the Burmans.

621 177 However, under British rule, and with the greater protection that has come to the Karens from it, the Government has established village tracts which comprise several hamlets under one headman. In such cases the Karens

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X

ATTITUDE TO THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

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Whenever the Karens have had an opportunity they have shown their loyalty to the British Government. They have a deep sense of gratitude for the security that has come with a settled and orderly government. This has allowed them to emerge from their hilly recesses, clear tracts of land on the more fertile plains, and build villages of more permanent construction than the flimsy bamboo structures that they built in the mountains when they had to move every two years. Here they could raise buffaloes and cattle and have reasonable protection against forays and marauders. Open exploitation by the Burmese was curbed if not entirely stopped.

During the first Burmese War in 1826 they served as guides for the English expedition against Ava and were commended for their good faith by Major Snodgrass in his "Narrative of the Burmese War". After the war they turned to the American missionaries for education, but they were forbidden to have any contact with the foreigners because the Burmese king and his Government feared the influence of intruders. They were prohibited from visiting their teachers even as late as 1851, when the Burmese Viceroy in Rangoon threatened to shoot instantly the first Karen he should find capable of reading.

In the Second Burmese War in 1852 they led the attacking forces of the British through jungle paths up to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, which was then the strongest military citadel near Rangoon, to attack it successfully from the rear.

The Burmese knew the desire of the Karens for

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freedom which would come from a change in Government, and they inflicted cruel vengeance upon them, burning their villages within a fifty mile radius of Rangoon, and putting men, women and children to death in barbarous ways. This caused large migrations from the territory under the Burmese king to Tenasserim and Arakan which were under British rule. Even here there were frequent miscarriages of justice, for they had to contend against subordinate Burmese officers who still tried to prevent them from gaining more prestige.

After the Third Burmese War in 1885 Karen levies were raised to assist the British. They did excellent work in the pacification of the country where former Burmese soldiers roamed and robbed at will. For assistance in putting down this terror the Karens received scant reward. In fact, many Karens, who with Government permission and their own money had purchased guns for the defence of the country, had them forcibly confiscated because of the unfounded suspicion of their scheming neighbours who resented their rising recognition.

During World War I many Karens were enrolled in the armed services and proved themselves capable and loyal wherever they were called to serve, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or for guard duty in India and the Malay States.

During the Burmese Rebellion under "Saya San" in 1930, in the Tharrawaddy District, the Karens made valuable contributions to the putting down of the insurrection and many of them received honours for their good work at the Durbar in Rangoon. When Karens can serve under officers of their own people they are most happy. They have confidence in British officers but

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often find it difficult to serve under Burman or Indian officers.

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During the rise of the nationalistic movements in Burma, the Karens naturally looked forward to being ruled by their old adversaries without much enthusiasm. They entered into the new government however and played their part as well as could be expected considering their limited opportunity ; by so doing they won the respect of their neighbours to a certain degree and made a contribution to the new regime. In the Cabinets formed under the constitution in force since 1935 there was usually a Karen member who held a portfolio.

As a rule the Karens have exhibited true loyalty to the British Government, but that does not preclude the presence of a few ambitious men who for personal gain have taken the part of Quislings in the present war. Although they happened to be in rather important positions they had only a small following, mostly of ignorant and self-seeking people, and were entirely in opposition to the general attitude of the Karens throughout the country.

In World War II the work of the Karens has been most evident. They occupy important positions in the army and in other services and have done excellent work. If we can believe rumours that have come from Burma, they are undergoing a great deal of suffering not only from the Japanese but from the large number of 'bad hats' who even in peaceful times are always ready to seize an opportunity of easy loot.

The position of minorities has always been difficult. The lot of the Karens has not been harder than that of many other small groups who have had different charac-

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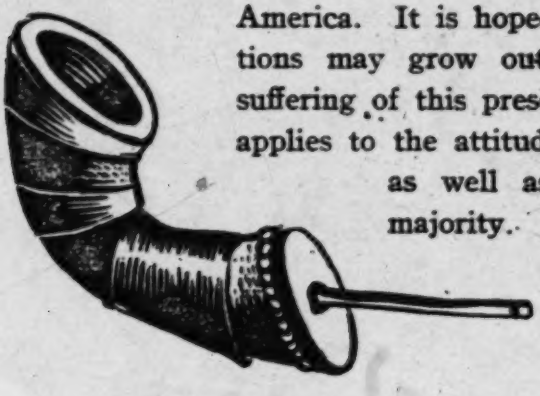
teristics and lived under more powerful neighbouring tribes or peoples whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or even America. It is hoped that better relations may grow out of the common suffering of this present conflict. This applies to the attitude of the minority as well as to that of the majority.



Pipe

XI

PROGRESS

Very few races or tribes of people have made greater progress in a century and a quarter than have the Karens in Burma. When we think of their wild state, their unhealthy ways, their lack of knowledge, their fear of strangers and their hesitancy in changing their old accepted ways, their primitive agriculture and crude villages, we can hardly realize that some of the refined, educated, well-dressed and cultured people that we have known come from such unlikely ancestry. The "wild cattle of the hills" have indeed turned out to be what they called themselves, *Pga K' Nyaw*, which actually means "men".

One of the greatest contributing factors in helping them to throw off their fears and rid themselves of the fetters of stagnating customs was their accepting the releasing power of the Christian religion. This opened their

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gious ideas and Buddhism and Christianity has led some to try to make syntheses of these various teachings. So-called "prophets" have tried to set themselves up as leaders in these developments. But none of them has made a very lasting impression on the people as a whole. Of these the Klibopah and the Ko San Ye movements were probably the most important. The remnants of the latter group have their centre in a large village, Padoplaw, near Nyaunglebin. One of the sons of a former leader, Saw Johnson Po Min, led them into an atheistic movement from which came some of those who were of uncertain loyalty at the time of the Japanese invasion. As compared with the large body of Karens who were unitedly loyal to the government and the religion in which they had found strength, they were a very small group.

Many Karens who qualified as teachers left their own homes and went as pioneers to Upper Burma, and to the outlying tribes such as the Chins, Kachins, Shans, Lahus, and Yawyins and, fired with unselfish zeal, have given their lives for what is really missionary work in preaching and teaching these tribes. During the Third Burmese War, when American missionaries had to leave the Kachin country, these Karen teachers stayed on and did effective work in laying the foundations for a new regime among them.

The development of education among the Karens helped to produce books to take the place of the old oral bard literature. In the beginning many of these books were written by the missionaries; but as time went on there grew up Karens who had a desire to contribute to the growth of their people and these have written a number of very acceptable works. In 1841 a newspaper in Karen,

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CHAPTER I

HABITAT AND TRIBAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE KAREN

101 131 The Karen are a group of Indo-Chinese tribes living principally in Burma, the easternmost province of the British Indian Empire, in the Indo-Chinese peninsula, and in the adjoining country of Siam to the east. They are found between the tenth and twenty-first degrees of north latitude and between the ninety-fourth and one hundredth degrees of east longitude. The greater part of this territory they occupy in connection with the other peoples of the country, namely, the Burmese, Shan, Siamese, and Chin. 642 The only exclusively Karen country is the hilly region of the Toungoo district and the Karenni subdivision, where the Karen chiefs 161 of five states, comprising 4,830 square miles and a population of 42,240, are still in power under the Advisory Council of the British [583] Government. There is also a Karen chief ruling one of the Shan States, and five other states in that section are ruled by Taungthu chiefs. In all these latter districts we find a mixed population.[1]

101 197 The whole group of Karen tribes can be divided into three divisions, according to their language or dialect differences. These are the Sgaw, Pwo, and Bwe groups.

The Sgaw group is the largest and most widely scattered. They are found all through the Irrawaddy Delta, from the vicinity of Prome southward, and from the Arracan coast eastward to the neighborhood of Lakong in Siam and southward to the lowest point of the British possessions. The Paku and Mawnepgha tribes of the southern Toungoo Hills belong to this group. One dialect, with only slight variations, is used throughout this region.

The Pwo group comprises, besides the Pwo Karen, the Taungthu tribe, who call themselves the Pao. The Pwo are found along the seacoast from Arracan to Mergui and are said to be found nowhere more than fifty miles inland. However, I think that some of the Pwo villages in the Henzada district may be a little farther inland than that. The Taungthu are found in a section of country

[1] J. G. Scott: Burma, Appendix, pp. 479-481.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE PROGRESS OF THE KAREN RACE

563 178 Although the Karen tribes have probably lived in Burma and Siam for more than a thousand years, in company with the Burmese, Shan, Siamese, and Chin, occupying no territory that they did not share with other people except the hills of Toungoo and Karenni, they have remained curiously isolated. Politically subordinate to the ruling races in the countries in which they had settled, except in the last named localities, they were subjected to oppression and exploitation, which they could resent only to the extent of local raids against poorly defended villages or of occasional assaults upon stray foes caught in the lonely jungle or in outlying districts. The inevitable result of these conditions was mutual hatred of the races, which was intensified on the side of the Burmese by their feeling of contempt for the subject race; while the enforced clannishness of the Karens drew sustenance from the conviction that their "golden age" lay in the past, and that the customs and precepts which they had inherited from the matchless elders of that age were not to be changed. There was nothing in the religion or life of the Burmese that appealed to the Karen, even if it had been offered to them—certainly nothing from which they could expect any amelioration of their condition. Progress was almost impossible to people so situated, who could only look vaguely into the future for the deliverer, the "white brother," whose coming was foretold in their traditions.

177 The acquisition by the British East India Company in 1827 of the provinces of Arracan and Tenasserim, on the western and southern coasts of Burma, respectively, made little impression on the Karen at the time, although it was the beginning of a new era in their history and that of Burma—one in which the ideals of justice and fair play were to become increasingly operative. Christian missionaries were beginning their labors in the country at the same time, thus making possible the spiritual emancipation to which the Karen had looked forward. The significance of these events lay in a double revelation, which the missionaries first imparted.

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That the Karen were eager for a change of administration is shown by several circumstances. In the first expedition of the English forces against Ava in 1826 they served as guides and were commended for their good faith by Major Snodgrass.[1] In the provinces that fell under British control they found themselves sympathetically dealt with and soon began to take on new ways; but in the province of Pegu, where the old regime of Ava still held sway, they continued to suffer from oppression. They were prohibited from visiting their teachers in Rangoon, and the Burmese viceroy of the city threatened, even as late as 1851, to shoot instantly the first Karen whom he should find capable of reading.[2] In the Second Burmese War (1852) they are reputed to have again acted as guides to the attacking force, which took the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, the most formidable military work near Rangoon, by assault in the rear.[3] The Burmese knew that the Karen regarded the English as their deliverers and took vengeance on them accordingly, burning all their villages within fifty miles of Rangoon, seizing or destroying their stores of rice, and putting men, women, and children to death in barbarous ways.[4] No wonder that a large number of the oppressed and persecuted people migrated from the delta of the Irrawaddy to Moulmein, or across the Arracean hills into those provinces where they could dwell in security. Even under British rule conditions were not what they might have been, for there were frequent miscarriages of justice on account of the employment of Burmese officers in subordinate and local positions.[5]

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Nevertheless, the new order of things in Burma has brought progress in many respects. The continual raids and forays, which previously devastated numerous Karen villages, have been stopped. The administration of justice has been taken out of the hands of private individuals and placed in those of accredited officials. Marked progress in education has been made. A new literature in the vernacular has come into circulation. Christianity has made a strong appeal to the Karen. Finally, in the World War the people again showed their loyalty to the British Empire by offering their services in its defense. Such of these topics as have not been

[1] Major Snodgrass, *Narrative of the Burmese War*, pp. 140, 142.

[2] Calista V. Luther, *The Vintons and the Karens*, p. 30.

[3] I have repeatedly heard the statement that Karens served as guides in this war, but can not verify it by reference to any work at hand.

[4] Calista V. Luther, *The Vintons and the Karens*, pp. 89, 90, 92, n.

[5] For instances of miscarriage of justice, see Mason, *Burma*, pp. 616-618; Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*. I regret that similar instances are not hard to find, even at the present day.

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treated elsewhere in this volume will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

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The cessation of open hostilities between the Karen and the Burmese has largely mitigated the old animosity existing between them. Where members of the two races live in close proximity, however, some friction is still produced. Nevertheless, the Karen's dislike of their neighbors is not so great as to prevent many of those living on the plains from adopting Burmese ways and speech. They do this not out of admiration for things Burmese, but because of the prevalence of Burmese culture and in order to avoid the appearance of rusticity that marks those who fail to conform. Some not only wear the dress of the Burmese and speak their language —always with more or less of an accent—but also, except the Christians, go to the pagodas and participate in Burmese feasts. A number of wealthy Karens, who have moved into the larger Burmese towns along the railway line and live there in Burmese style, have to all appearances lost their racial identity. In many cases those who have copied the manners of their neighbors, experience a decided weakening of their old religious faith and its moral restraints, being led into evil ways by Burmans of the less respectable classes, with whom they fraternize.

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The first experiment of the British in the administration of justice among the Karen, was not successful. It consisted in appointing certain influential Karen chiefs to serve as magistrates for their people. This plan was unsatisfactory because some of the appointees were reluctant to assume authority, and also because the different tribes were much intermingled. It was, therefore, decided to try the cases of Karens, like those of the members of the other races, in the ordinary courts. While this method is correct in principle and an improvement in practice, it has not always been administered by representatives of the English nation or in the spirit of British justice. A closer supervision of the courts is needed to curb the prejudices sometimes manifested by the local magistrates.

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The progress of the Karen in education has been very marked. Their "Lost Book" having been restored to them by their "white brother" in the person of the Christian missionary, they have been most eager to learn to read it. This has been true from the early years of missionary activity. Before the British had established orderly government in Burma, one American missionary had pupils in her school in Moulmein almost every year who came over two